

The Past is a Moving Image

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In my research on contemporary Black artists in Denmark, I explore possibilities and challenges of bringing varied practices into a single story. There is a scarcity of ways to engage with this history in the absence of collective identification across time. And yet this is crucial if we want to understand these practices as having a legacy in Denmark. Black artists have largely been marginalized and misrepresented by conventional Danish art historical narratives, which are white-dominated, color evasive and lacking in “diasporic literacy”.¹ In my work, I use artist interviews to direct attention towards the embodied, the experiential and the affective, opening an array of situated perspectives on working as a Black artist in Denmark.

For *Remnants*, I invited artist Ellen Nyman to collaboratively reactivate a section of her personal archive related to her artistic and activist project SPACECAMPAIN, focusing on her interventions around the 2001 Danish general election—an election that is remembered as a watershed moment where xenophobia took unprecedented hold of Danish politics. This summer, Ellen and I met in a Copenhagen allotment garden which has special significance to SPACECAMPAIN, having appeared in one of the project’s actions. We used archival materials to access the past and Ellen shared memories that extend beyond any archival records. We also visited Christiansborg, the site of Ellen’s action on election night 2001. We explored the implications of bringing SPACECAMPAIN back to Copenhagen twenty years after the project was active here.

At the turn of the millennium, SPACECAMPAIN critiqued anti-Black, anti-African and anti-Muslim racism in mass media, parliamentary politics and public space in Denmark and beyond. Among other tactics, Ellen staged actions as Alem—a figure often recognisable by her distinctive costume: a yellow textile styled to emulate a chador. Alem infiltrated media narratives, aiming to disrupt the white imaginary’s stereotypical ideas about East African Muslim women as devoid of agency. For as a 2003 SPACECAMPAIN poster remarks, skewed and sensationalised media narratives about European border politics had crafted

¹ Katherine McKittrick writes that, “[d]iasporic literacy signals ways of being and ways of living (memories, imaginations, mnemonics), that we know and share in order to collectively struggle against suffocating racial logics. Like sorrow songs. Like freedom dreams.” McKittrick, *Dear Science*, Duke University Press, 2021, p. 6.

fictions so powerful that ‘any similarity to actual persons or events is unintentional’.² A large part of researching SPACECAMPAIN is piecing together the marks it made in the public debate across articles, books, interviews, press photographs and TV broadcasts.

I first approached Ellen a year ago to ask about her relationship to Alem, which was unarticulated in existing art historical publications. Ellen explained how SPACECAMPAIN coheres around concepts of outer space (as a realm of existential wonder and suspension of oppressive systems), alienation (arising from the displacement that shapes Ellen’s lived experience as a transnational adoptee) and space-making (an indispensable strategy for Black artists in Scandinavia). And where prior interpretations of SPACECAMPAIN focus on Alem as an ‘image’, ‘tool’, ‘icon’ or ‘projection’, our exchanges have enabled new reflections on how acts of naming and veiling in the creation of this figure can be understood as strategies of cultural reclaiming and self-fashioning.³ In our conversations, glimpses of which appear in *Remnants*, Ellen and I treat retrospective reflection on SPACECAMPAIN as a chance to tease out relationships between ‘the self-that-was, the current speaking self, and the projected self’.⁴

Our dialogue has also raised new questions: If Ellen’s actions in the 1990s and 2000s were born of an urgency of countering rising xenophobia, which has since been normalised across Denmark’s political spectrum, how does SPACECAMPAIN’s critique appear now? How do the historical documents in SPACECAMPAIN’s archive challenge current viewers to think through complex relationships between solidarity and self-fashioning, agency and appropriation, passing and hyperbole, self and alternate self? Should artistic actions be explained? What can be articulated now that could not be articulated then? What risks being forgotten?

² SPACECAMPAIN released this poster in 2003 for the project Copycat and the 3rd Berlin Biennale to protest EU border politics. This poster, reprinted for *Remnants*, was designed as a protest sign for encounters with news media where the dominant narrative calls for intervention.

³ Such perspectives are particularly pertinent in light of Ellen’s current doctoral research on the relationship between acting and Black transnational adoptee subjectivation.

⁴ Linda Sandino, ‘Artist-in-progress’, in Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, and Tamboukou (eds.) *Beyond Narrative Coherence*, De Gruyter, 2010, p. 88.